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AUTHOR Katz, Laurie; Bauch, Jerry
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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the importance of parents' involvement in their child's education and the belief that lack of teacher training and experience in working with parents affects what teachers do to involve families in their schools, this study examined the impact of a teacher education model on preservice teachers' and inservice teachers' (program graduates) attitudes and skill preparation fostering family/school collaboration. The Peabody Family Involvement Initiative (PFII) is based on themes related to families, family-school collaboration, and developmental issues, and involves three components: (1) general knowledge; (2) skills; and (3) authentic "real life" settings. The themes were addressed in a 1-semester university course taken during the sophomore or junior year and in the implementation of "theory into practice" activities during a 15-week student teacher placement. Mail surveys were completed by preservice teachers just finishing the 1-semester course, by preservice teachers completing their student teacher placement, and by inservice teachers who had graduated from the program within the last 3 years. Sixty-nine surveys were returned from practicing teachers, for a 33 percent return rate. Findings indicated that teachers who took the course were more likely to feel prepared to implement parent involvement activities. Nevertheless, teachers who took the course indicated that they needed more preparation. The parent involvement activities engaged in most often were introductory home/school activities, written progress notes, phone calls to families, participating in meeting with parents of children with special needs, and parent-teacher conferences. (Contains 15 references.) (KB)

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The Peabody Family Initiative: Preservice Preparation for Family/School Involvement

Laurie Katz, Ed.D.
Middle Tennessee State University

&

Jerry Bauch, Ph.D.
Peabody College of Vanderbilt University

Laurie Katz

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Presentation at the annual Mid-South Educational Research Association; Point Clear, Alabama. November, 1999. For more information, contact Dr. Laurie Katz, Asst. Prof.in Early Childhood Education, Dept. of Human Sciences, Box 86, Murfreesboro, TN 37132. Work: (615) 898-5526 or email address: lkatz@mtsu.edu

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Involving parents in their child's education has long been regarded as a critical component to the child's development. Urie Bronfenbrenner (1974) analyzed the effects of a series of longitudinal studies focusing on programs for preschool children and concluded that parent involvement seemed to be a critical factor in the impact of other intervention activities as well as a "fixative" in stabilizing the effects of other intervention processes. Benefits have not only been reported for only the children, but for the parents and teachers, as well. An increase in children's academic performance and self-esteem has been reported with parents being more involved in their child's education. Parent/teacher communication helps teachers better understand the child within the context of his/her family, thus providing valuable input for teachers as they adjust their teaching strategies accordingly. Parental resources can supplement and reinforce a teacher's efforts in providing a broader base of learning. Parents are more prepared to assist their children if they have a better understanding of their child's performance, the child's curriculum and are informed about specific ways to assist their child (Gestwicki, 1992).

These benefits aren't realized unless teachers are trained as to strategies of involving parents in the educational process. Many of our teacher education institutions include little if any training in parent involvement. Young and Hite (1994) conducted a national study and found:

- one-fifth of teacher education institutions offered no parent involvement preparation
- a few colleges "include some parent involvement content" in five or more courses;
- 79.1% of teacher education programs "offer one or more courses that include content dealing with parent involvement" (p.157).

These results must be viewed with caution, since "including some parent involvement" is not clearly defined. Offering a course is not the same as making parent involvement preparation a requirement for all preservice teachers. At

many universities, the push to add an academic major to undergraduate preservice training has either reduced the availability of parent involvement courses or prevented the addition of requirements to an already full curriculum. See Katz & Bauch (1999) for a more extensive report of parent involvement training in teacher education programs.

It is believed that the absence of initial training and experience working with parents is connected to what teachers do to involve families in their schools. Thus, one of the main purposes of this study was examine the impact of a teacher education model, the Peabody Family Involvement Initiative, on preservice teachers. Both teacher attitudes and skill preparation fostering family/school collaboration were addressed in the study.

Another purpose of this study was to better understand how to assess the impact of teacher preparation for the preservice teacher. As of the year 2000 the NCATE standards are requiring teacher education programs to focus on "student outcomes" as a way to demonstrate that students are indeed learning according to the objectives/competencies of the certification program. An evaluation component will help teaching institutions determine how to readjust their programs to meet the needs of certified teachers once they are employed in the classroom.

The Peabody Family Involvement Initiative

Peabody College of Vanderbilt University has had a "parent involvement" course for more than ten years as a required part of the undergraduate teacher education program. The course ("Parents and their Developing Children") is required for all students seeking certification in early childhood education (pre-k through grade three) and often elected by elementary and some secondary education majors. The three-semester hour course is consistent with current recommendations to prepare teachers for family involvement. The course is routinely taught by both of the investigators in the study, accompanied by

frequent joint planning and occasional team teaching.

Conceptual framework of the program

The Peabody Family Involvement Initiative (PFII) involved three major components; 1) general knowledge, 2) skills, and 3) authentic "real life" settings. These components were based on themes that addressed families, family-school collaboration, and developmental issues of children in their preschool and early elementary years. Themes pertaining to families include every family as unique, having strengths, and respected as being their child's first teacher. The concept of "family' is presented as constituting many different structures (e.g. two-parent, single, blended, divorced, adoptive) with the child's primary caregiver being a parent, sibling, relative, friend, foster parent, etc. Each family is perceived as having their own shared values, priorities, roles and relationships in raising children; i.e. their own culture. Culture is defined according to Goodenough, a cultural anthologist, as "shared expectations of standards people hold for perceiving, believing, acting, evaluating & communicating". Our program operates from a "cultural competence" approach that views the school as an inclusive, respectful setting where diversity is welcomed. A family systems theory is presented to help prospective teachers better understand the roles and relationships within a family unit and how the impact of the school environment affects families in different ways. An ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is used to organize the complexity of biological, psychological, social, cultural, and economic information to better understand how forces of the environment besides the family directly or indirectly influence a child's growth. By perceiving each child's family as an individual unit and part of a larger system family involvement is discussed as activities both inside and

outside of the classroom that build on family strengths and foster collaboration with the school.

In the PFII, these themes are first addressed in a one-semester university course called "Parents and their Developing Children". This class is most often taken by students during their sophomore or junior year. During the course, family/school collaboration strategies are taught that are representative of Epstein's six family involvement categories. According to Epstein, schools have a responsibility to: 1) provide families the skills and knowledge needed to help their children at each age level, 2) communicate with families through notes, telephone calls, conferences, and other types of communication, 3) include parents as volunteers and assistants in the classrooms and other areas of school, 4) guide parents so they can "assist their own children" through monitoring, discussing, and helping with homework, 5) involve parents in decision making, and 6) draw on community resources, social agencies, health services and businesses, and provide programs that give children and families the support that they need (Decker, L.E., Gregg, G.A., & Decker, V.A., 1996). These Epstein "typologies" have become widely used frameworks for studying parent involvement, and are also the sources of the PTA's National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs (National PTA, 1997). One of the goals of PFII is to prepare preservice teachers to work in a wide range of schools so they can effectively implement traditional family involvement approaches that are common in many schools as well as use new and innovative approaches occurring less often. Some of these strategies were taught by course assignments, lectures, and exercises. Two examples of traditional strategies are role playing parent/teacher conferences and developing class newsletters. Examples of non-traditional strategies are using electronic voice mail and interviewing families in their homes.

The third component involves a "theory into practice" approach where preservice teachers have an opportunity through course assignments and student teaching placements to implement some of the concepts and strategies they were taught in the course into "real-life" situations. A list was developed of approximately 14 family/school activities in conjunction with the Coordinator of Student Teaching, which became part of the expectations for the student teaching experience. This list was developed from the themes of PFII. Preservice teachers selected or adapted activities from this list and implemented them during their 15 weeks of classroom placements. These activities were supervised by Peabody's teacher education program and the cooperating teachers at their assigned schools. The "practice" component allows students to translate the content learned in the course to the reality of the classroom situation. Incidentally, we also found that student teachers tried out some practices that were not regular routines of their placement school or cooperating teacher.

The Present Study

In 1998, several questions were examined about the PFII and to evaluate program effects as teachers left the university and became teachers. The main purpose was to better understand how students felt and what activities they used after completing the PFII experience. The following questions directed the study.

1. What are the attitudes about parent involvement activities of teacher education students and graduates after completing a parent involvement training program (PFII)?
2. Which strategies and approaches did student teachers and classroom teachers think are important and feasible?
3. Which strategies and approaches did classroom teachers actually use in their schools?

4. Were there differences in the parent involvement attitudes and practices between subjects who completed the PFII and those who had no specific training?

Survey development

Survey instruments were developed that would give respondents a chance to reflect their views on these topics and (for experienced teachers) to report their use of some of the family involvement strategies in their classrooms. Many of the survey constructs were originally derived from Epstein's typologies of parent involvement by Gifford (1991). The "efficacy" elements originated with Gibson (Gibson & Dembo, 1984) and Ashton (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Gifford used data from her survey to assess the effects of student teaching on the attitudes of the student teachers (in a college setting where there was no coursework on parent involvement). While Gifford found "no significant differences" in attitudes before and after student teaching, she noted a trend toward less positive attitudes after completing student teaching. This is not surprising in view of the lack of preservice coursework, training and practice. Unprepared student teachers faced the same situation that unprepared first-year teachers experience; uncertainty, confusion, anxiety and the beginnings of negative attitudes about parent and family involvement.

In another study of parent involvement attitudes of preservice teachers, Tichenor (1995) developed a Likert-type instrument that was adapted from one developed by McBride (1991). In the Tichenor study, the subjects at two universities took a parent involvement course before student teaching. She found that they had generally positive attitudes about the Epstein categories, but that the group did not feel well prepared to conduct parent involvement activities during student teaching. A comparison group of student teachers who did not take a course felt even less prepared. Foster and Loven (1992) also used a

Likert-type questionnaire and the efficacy construct to evaluate the beliefs and perspectives about parent involvement of undergraduate students at Memphis State University.

Two different surveys were designed for the PFII. The first survey addressed nine general family involvement activities that were consistent with Epstein's model, the skill/content/practice construct promoted by the U.S. Department of Education, the content of the course, and studies regarding the types of activities being implemented in the schools (Bauch, 1994). These activities were: 1) Introductory activities, 2) written forms of communication, 3) telephone communication, 4) family volunteers in the classroom, 5) meetings regarding students who have special needs, 6) home visits, 7) recorded messages on voice mail, 8) participation in decision-making meetings (e.g. PTA/site-based), and 9) parent/teacher conferences. Each type of family involvement activity had two corresponding categories in a Likert scale response. The first category addressed the teacher's attitude and their perceived feasibility in implementing this activity. The second corresponding category addressed their preparation towards implementing the activity. Likert-like scales have typically been used to sample these concepts (Guskey & Passaro, 1992). The first and second groups of preservice teachers received this survey with the only difference being the cover letter acknowledging their roles as students completing the course "Parents and their Developing Children" or student teachers completing their classroom placements.

The third group, the inservice teachers, received a modified survey. The main differences between the two surveys focused on the inservice teachers *implementation* of these identified parent/school activities. For example, all three groups were asked to respond to the family involvement activity of involving family members as volunteers in the classroom. Groups one and two were

asked to respond to the importance and feasibility of this activity. Group three was asked to provide information about their use of the strategy, noting how many families were involved as volunteers in the classroom and in what capacity.

The survey was piloted with both preservice and inservice teachers. Interviews were held with each of the participants after they completed the survey. We used pilot tests to obtain feedback regarding duplication of content among the questions and unclear or incomplete directions. We were also interested in the participants' written comments. The revised version included ample space to elaborate on their preparedness and reasons for the extent of their implementing specific strategies.

Sample

Three groups of preservice and inservice teachers were asked to complete surveys during the1997-1998 school year. The first group were students who had just completed the course "Parents and their Developing Children." These sixty-seven students were primarily undergraduates receiving certification in either early childhood or elementary education. Some were receiving dual certification in early childhood or elementary education as well as special education. Other students who took the course were majors in Child Development or Human Organization & Development.

The second group of sixty-six students were prospective teachers who were completing 15 weeks in classroom placements as "student teachers". All of these students had completed a parent/school collaboration course.

The third group consisted of teachers who had graduated and received teaching certification from Peabody College within the last three years. Members of this group had teaching experience from one - three years. About 210 surveys were mailed to the practicing teachers with sixty-nine (33%) returned. Eight had taken another type of parent course as part of their special education training.

Data from this small group were not included unless their responses added significantly to the overall results.

Limitations of the study

A few of the students who took the course were not preparing to be teachers. Their responses were included because they completed the same requirements and experiences as the teacher preparation group. Their responses were not dissimilar from the other students in the course.

A second limitation was in the limited opportunity to influence prospective teachers toward excellent family involvement. We offered one course plus application during student teaching. The Harvard Family Research Project on preparing teachers to work with families suggested that training should be taught on a gradual basis, through a number of methods, and spread throughout the teacher education curricula. (p.15). They point out that one course is not enough, especially when family involvement content is not integrated in other courses on related subjects. A third limitation was the measurement strategy. Survey instruments reflect the self-perceptions of the respondent and are difficult to verify or validate.

Results

The results of this survey are organized under three themes: preparation, activity types and family preparation. This grouping reflects the sequence of events for participants in the study; undergraduate preparation for parent involvement, activities elected by teachers and the levels of engagement by families in these activities.

Preparation

The teachers who took the course "Parents and their Developing Children" stated they were "very prepared" more often than the teachers who didn't take the course in all of the nine parent involvement activities sampled. The attached

table demonstrates the discrepancy between the two groups: sixty-nine percent of the people who took the course said they were "well prepared" and only thirty percent of the non-course takes reported that they felt well prepared. Preparation for home visits was the one exception, where neither group felt well prepared and there was only a seventeen percent difference between groups. When asked if they "need more preparation" to engage in parent involvement activities, both course-takers and non-course-takers stated that they needed more training. Teachers who did not take the course responded most often to "need more training" or "no preparation". There was a 60% - 73% discrepancy between the teachers who had taken the course vs. had not taken the course in stating their lack of "no preparation." Both teachers who took or did not take the course stated they "needed more preparation" in all the parent involvement activities except for home visits and committees. In these two activities none of the teachers who did not take the course reported that they needed more training. Only one teacher in each of these activities responded s/he was "very prepared" to engage in home visits and committees but the rest of these teachers reported "no preparation." Over half of the teachers who took the course stated they needed "more training" in meetings with families who had children with special needs. Anecdotal comments referred to the need for more training in this activity specifically in the referral and prereferral process.

Other anectodal remarks from the surveys highlight how the course helped prepare these teachers to implement parent involvement activities:

"I have referred back to my notes often especially during conference times."

"I felt very prepared for these (parent/teacher conferences) I still remember the clues and role playing from the class. They helped me to prepare."

"This class was one of my favorite courses because it was so practical and thorough. I have definitely put the information I learned to active use. The handouts are still in my file and I also refer to my Parent Involvement Report . . ."

Types of parent involvement activities

The types of parent involvement activities have been categorized in several different ways (Bauch, 1994). The Epstein "typologies" are the most popular, and influenced how the course was designed in this study. What teachers do to engage parents is influenced by their initial training (or lack of preparation) and the activities that are present in the schools where teachers work. If a teacher is well prepared to interact with parents at an "open house" event and the school does not have open house meetings, the teacher might report high preparation but low use of this activitiy. If the class does not emphasize meeting with parents of children with special needs and the school requires teachers to attend all Individual Education Plans and other "staffing" meetings, the teacher may feel rather unprepared and report that they often do this activity. In the present study, the types of parent involvement activities that teachers most often engaged in were: introductory home/school activities - written progress notes, calling family members by phone, conducting parent/teacher conferences, meeting with a parent who has a child with special needs. Seventy-one percent of the teachers in this study reported that they participated in these activities.

The next most frequent activities was involving family members as volunteers. (42 - 63% of teachers resonding). Participation with parents in committee meetings followed, with about 47% of the teachers reporting this activity. The type of committee meetings mentioned most often were scheduled PTA-type meetings and site-based school improvement committees.

Teachers were not highly engaged in the non-traditional or innovative

parent involvement practices. Twenty-seven to forty-two percent of teachers reported using voice mail to communicate with parents, and only six to twelve percent made home visits. When examined by whether teachers took the course or not, there were no differences in the type of parent involvement activity they used.

Family Participation

Teachers were also asked about the number of families in their child's classroom that were involved in a specific parent involvement activity. This information was elicited for all of the nine PI activities except for meetings regarding students who have special needs and participation in decision making meetings. In a Likert scale regarding the number of families involved (i.e. few, less than half, most, all) teachers who took the course had a greater percentage of "most" & "all" in Introductory Activities (69% v 57%), voice mail (36% v. 27%), and volunteers (17% v 9%). However, teachers who didn't take the course reached more families (76%) than teachers who took the course (72%) in written forms of communication. In home visits, of the 6 teachers who took the course 83% (5) reached few families and 17% (1) reached all of the families. The 4 teachers who didn't take the course who were engaging in home visits all were reaching few or less than half of the families. Teachers who made phone calls were asked to respond to the number of phone calls they made regarding positive news about their child and about student problems. Teachers who took the course reached 25% of their families (most or all) with positive news whereas teachers who didn't take the course reached 28% of the families (most or all). Teachers who took the course called families most of their families 10% about student problems 13% who didn't take the course called families stated most re: student problems. Neither groups called all of their families about student problems.

Summary

Our study concluded that the parent involvement activities teachers most engaged in were Introductory home/school activities, written progress notes to families, calling family members by phone, participating in a meeting with a parent who has a child with special needs and, conducting parent teacher conferences. These are activities that are traditionally part of many school programs and policies. In fact, teachers are likely to engage in the parent involvement activities that are prized or expected in the local school culture (Brand, 1996). For example, if the school sets a high priority on family literacy, it is likely that teachers would report being engaged in these activities *regardless of their preservice preparation*. The other parent involvement activities less stated by the teachers were those that only some schools have instituted such as recorded messages or home visits. Even though we emphasized these topics in the course, individual teachers are not likely to start innovative practices in schools where those practices do not exist (or where special technology or policies are absent).

On the other hand, teachers may engage in activities that are up to the discretion of the individual teachers as to their implementation such as "parents as volunteers". Teachers may engage in activities due to policy but they may engage in parent involvement to a greater extent (reaching more families) when they are more prepared to do so. Teachers who implement activities that are not part of regular school programs may reach a higher number of families due to their preparation for specific activities. Teachers who took the course actually reached more families in their classes than teachers who did not take the course for Introductory Activities, voice mail, and volunteers.

Teachers who took the course responded at a significantly higher rate than teachers who did not take the course that they were more prepared to implement parent involvement activities. However, teachers who took the course still stated that they needed more preparation. This response indicates that a one semester course is insufficient to prepare teachers for parent involvement activities and that ongoing inservice training may be pertinent to meet these needs.

Implications for Practice

The study demonstrated that following a fairly traditional plan (one course plus student teaching practice) had a positive effect on the way teacher education students perceive and value family involvement in childrens' education. The undergraduate teacher education program also carried over into teaching practice, where teachers who were involved in PFII reported that they were using many of the strategies in their schools. This seems to demonstrate that many other teacher education programs could follow this pattern without major revision of their curricula. While it might require the addition of one more course, the value of preparing teachers to work with families far outweighs the inconvenience of a minor change in teacher education programs.

A more comprehensive approach was suggested by Foster and Loven, where they recommended:

- include more parent involvement preparation systematically throughout the teacher education program;

- placing students in laboratory experience where they can interact with families of varying socioeconomic levels and ethnic backgrounds;

- engage students in practice of parent communication strategies during their undergraduate program; and

- plan additional training and support related to parent involvement for

teachers during their first few years in the profession (Foster & Loven, 1992). We agree with these recommendations and believe that a more systematic and integrated approach to parent involvement preparation would further improve the performance of beginning teachers.

The surveys that were completed at all three stages of the study demonstrate the possibility of utilizing a formative evaluation approach to show student performance at various levels of their preparation. This type of approach could assist institutions in identifying strengths of the program as well as areas where students need more theoretical knowledge or experience in the schools working with parents. (Patton, 1997) Making changes to the student teacher survey may assist in further structuring of the student teaching placement so preservice teachers will gain a broader experience in parent/involvement activities.

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